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Dreaming of A Better World

GREAT DAY COMING
A Memoir of the 1930s
By Hope Hale Davis
Steerforth Press. 337 pp. \$24

IN THE MYTHOLOGY of the American left, no period is more suffused in the glow of romance than the 1930s. Even now, with Soviet communism exposed as an economic, political and moral failure, the '30s retain their hold on the imagination of the left, evoking memories of youthful ardor and idealism. The literature of the period—even the confessional literature—to this day treats those members of the American intelligentsia who flirted with or joined the Communist Party not as mere dupes but as well-meaning utopians who were the victims not of delusion but of betrayal.

Hope Hale Davis's memoir is of a piece with this literature. As an account of her private life during that time, it is an arresting and occasionally moving document, but as an account of her attraction to and eventual alienation from communism, it is seriously deficient. Though Davis pays lip service to recantation—"My shame is in the terms of my joining: I forfeited my most essential freedom, to think for myself"—her heart does not seem to be in it, for the lingering fragments of romance clearly are what live most vividly in her memory.

Davis, who is now in her 92nd year, was an archetypal American Communist. Until her move to Washington in the spring of 1933, she had resided in Greenwich Village and worked in magazine publishing, consorting with other smart young people who lived *la vie boheme*. In particular she consorted with the charismatic British radical Claud Cockburn, with whom she had an affair and with whom she conceived "Project Revolutionary Baby." Her roots in bourgeois society were still sufficiently firm that she persuaded Cockburn to grant her the formality of a marriage certificate; it was clear from the outset that she would be a good bourgeois mother and assume responsibility for the care of their daughter, Claudia.

The move to Washington came shortly after Claudia's birth. Davis came to the capital both for the somewhat quirky familial comfort offered by her sister, Mimi, who lived in the Virginia countryside, and in the hope of finding work in the new Democratic administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Like many other leftists she had doubts about Roose-



PHOTO BY MIMI BRITTEN FROM "GREAT DAY COMING"

Hope Hale Davis and her daughter Claudia in 1933

velt's commitment to radical reform, but like many others she hoped to burrow from within—in her case, as it turned out, from within the office of the Consumers Counsel.

The principal subjects of her attention, though, were Claudia and Hermann Brunck, a young economist who had come to the United States from Germany. Davis and Brunck fell in love; together they joined the Communist Party in 1934, by which time Cockburn had been regrettably cast aside and Davis had married Brunck. Davis joined the party under the pseudonym of Mary MacFarland, "after my strong-willed, talented musician aunt who had died in Mother's arms at the age of 20" and whom Davis regarded as a "romantic figure."

This last certainly was appropriate, for Davis found romance aplenty in the party. On the evening of her matriculation she told Hermann "that I'd never been so stimulated in my life," whereupon "we hurried home newly elated toward another night together." For her as for others, the party had that effect; it was part politics, part aphrodisiac. Indeed, as has been remarked elsewhere of this and other radical movements, the sex often seemed considerably more important than the radicalism, though obviously the intensity of the one was closely connected to the fervor of the other.

Davis does not give a very clear or detailed picture of life within the Communist Party as it existed in the nation's capital. Many of its members worked for the government, but none seems to have occupied especially strategic positions. A press release for *Great Day Coming* advises us that "what

Davis has to say about Gardner Jackson, Hal Ware, Jay Peters and Alger Hiss is an important contribution to the history of American radicalism in the years before World War II," but in fact (a) she has little to say about any of the above and (b) with the exception of Hiss, all of them are fully and deservedly forgotten.

What Davis does say is that Hermann's attempts to meet the party's demands on his time, coupled with the demands of his government job, led to his mental breakdown. Davis isn't very good about dates—a common and maddening omission in memoirs—but at some point in the mid-'30s Hermann, normally cheerful and self-confident, began to suffer what a friend called "sieges of doubt, doubt of his own ability." In time these took the form of paranoia—Hermann was convinced among other things that "he was the focus of Hitler's plans"—and led to his incarceration at a mental institution and his treatment, or mistreatment, by the formidable psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, whose initial kindness, Davis says, eventually turned into manipulation and deceit.

At last Davis got Hermann out from under her control and into the care of a doctor who was experimenting with insulin shock as a cure in such cases. This doctor believed that among all his potential patients Hermann's "might be the mind most worth saving," but though the treatment was not without beneficial aspects it, too, failed. Hermann committed suicide and Davis was left to continue without him, which she seems to have done with strength and forbearance.

PERHAPS IT IS not surprising that Davis has permitted the story of her marriage, rather than the story of her flirtation with communism, to dominate this memoir. Not merely is it a better story, but it can be tied up more neatly, if painfully. Davis eventually turned away from the rigidity of the party's orthodoxy, and, like so many others, she felt "shock, incredulity, then slow, unwilling belief, followed by angry hopelessness," at the nonaggression pact between Stalin and Hitler. But to the end she seems to see the failures of communism in terms of regulations and individuals rather than in terms of ideology and conviction; if she felt otherwise, she surely would have given a less sunny title to this memoir.

One final point. Readers no doubt will be struck by the contradiction between the proletarian rhetoric so idly bandied about by Davis and her friends and the actualities of their lives. They were not wealthy people, but they lived well and occasionally self-indulgently. Davis had a black servant to whose ideological uplift she occasionally gave time but whose services she expected to be forthcoming at her, rather than the servant's, convenience. She and her friends liked good food and good wine, and had more than their share of both at a time when much of the country did without. At times Davis gently upbraids herself for this hypocrisy—"those who can exploit will exploit, even if they are Marxists"—but at heart for this, too, she is unrepentant. ■